

Square-one strategies: Graduates should take advantage of their first job opportunities



There's a lot to learn during an initial job, so it's important for new employees to do a lot of listening and learning. (Nruboc/Dreamstime.com)

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Getting your first job is one thing. Working? Well, that's another. There's a lot to learn during that initial job, so it's important for new employees to do a lot of listening and learning. That's not to say they shouldn't be confident and

assertive, but it's obvious that our career experts think that a little humility combined with an ample amount of curiosity can go a long way.

Here's some advice for Class of 2017 graduates who are about to begin their first job:

Wear nice clothes.

"Dress better. No, better than that. Even if your new company has a casual dress code, make sure your clothes are on the professional side of the spectrum, not the spent-the-night-on-the-floor end of the spectrum. A collared shirt and a pair of khaki pants won't kill you."

--Evelyn Walker, career coach, Chicago

Take advantage of your 401(k).

"If you're fresh out of college and in your first job, retirement is likely the last thing on your mind. That's understandable, since retirement could be more than 40 years away. However, as a young adult on your own for the first time, it's smart to start saving with your first job, especially if your employer offers a retirement savings plan. If your employer offers a 401(k) plan and will match your contributions, consider contributing enough to take advantage of the match."

--Don McDonough, regional sales executive, Merrill Edge, Chicago

Find a mentor.

"At every stage of life, a mentor is an invaluable resource for achieving success. Navigating the challenges of the job market is infinitely easier with a mentor who can introduce you to industry influencers and open doors to new career opportunities. Once you're in the workplace, you can continue to benefit from this person's knowledge and experiences as you set goals or are

thrust into unfamiliar situations. Find a mentor now, then pay it forward and be a mentor to help someone else realize their full potential."

--Melissa Beck, CEO, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, Santa Ana, Calif.

Work hard and be nice to people.

"It's so simple and yet probably the best advice you should ever take and live by. Good things -- promotions, upward mobility, better jobs, salary increases - - come to those who work hard by demonstrating a great work ethic; meeting deadlines; being accountable, responsible and productive; and treating all people well. That includes clients, customers, admin support, team members, managers and everyone in between. Simple but very true and words to work by.

--Alyssa Hammond, director of career education & innovation, Bentley University, Waltham, Mass.

Be positive and patient.

"As a new hire or early-career employee, it's important to be viewed as someone who listens well, asks good questions, shows flexibility and is easy to work with. Employers are looking for employees who are confident and willing to make recommendations based on strong research and analysis. Employers crave strong team players who make positive things happen and produce results. Let your performance do the talking. Higher-level roles need to be earned based on results, and constantly asking about your next promotion or role won't make it happen any faster and may cause damage to your reputation. Be patient and realistic. Most employers want to keep its best performers but also need to make sure organizational objectives are met."

--Brian Weed, CEO, GradStaff

Pay off your debt and create an emergency fund.

"As you start your first job upon graduation, there are important things to think about, like getting out from under any debt and establishing an emergency fund to help you pursue a successful financial life.

If you have any debt like student loans, credit cards or other obligations, create a plan to pay them off. The sooner you're able to do so, the more money you will save in interest.

An emergency fund can potentially provide back up money to draw upon if you become unemployed or receive an unanticipated expense, such as a medical bill, without having to tap into your savings. As you create an emergency plan, aim to maintain at least six months' worth of living expenses in an easy to access checking or savings account."

--Joe Santos, regional sales manager, Merrill Edge, Los Angeles.

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